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# Homelessness Past and Present: The Case of the United States, 1890-1925

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# Homelessness Past and Present

# The Case of the United States, 1890–1925

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*An examination of the professional, political, and popular literature on the nature and extent of homelessness from 1890 to 1925 affords a comparison of the economic and social characteristics of the homeless population at the turn of the century with that of today. The discussion covers the ensuing debates over the causes of homelessness, the various subgroups among the homeless during both periods, and the relative rates of homelessness, the context of extreme poverty and dislocation, and the prevalence of individual disabilities. Except for the growing numbers of homeless families over the past decade, the homeless populations during both eras have many similarities. Then and now, homeless people tend to be young, single, and America-born, with fragmented social supports and a history of dysfunctional family relationships. Although individual difficulties play an important role in determining who is most vulnerable, the authors argue that systemic ills plaguing society virtually ensure the existence of homelessness. Furthermore, during both eras ideologically driven views and moral prejudices have obscured the fundamental question of this country's willingness to care for its neediest members.*

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**W**ith the resurgence of homelessness in the early 1980s came allegations that the problem was new — a peculiar consequence of late industrial society, of Reaganomics, or of the social problems of a class of poor people weaned on welfare. The media popularized the view that although homelessness in the United States has a past, the homeless population today is fundamentally different from that of previous times. Various experts claimed that the characteristics of homeless people, as well as the causes of homelessness, have changed.<sup>1</sup>

A careful historical review has proved otherwise. As this article demonstrates, homelessness is in many respects timeless, and the needs of homeless persons continually mirror those of the most economically and socially disadvantaged. While subtle changes in the characteristics of the homeless population have occurred over time, the ceaseless tide of people forced onto the streets points to structural flaws in our society that ensure the existence of this problem. To examine this claim in historical

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context, we have drawn from the professional, political, and popular literature of the period from 1890 to 1925, comparing and contrasting the problem then with the problem now. During both periods, a disproportionate percentage of homeless persons suffered from disabilities that understandably resulted in their increased susceptibility to the vagaries of the economy and the housing market. In addition, persons with depleted support networks were more likely to become homeless.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, the complexity of factors leading to homelessness has generally been overlooked. During both periods, debates about homelessness have often degenerated into discussions about the character and morality of homeless people. For example, one 1902 depiction describes a hobo as "a moral degenerate" and "a victim of subtle vices which . . . are undermining our national vitality."<sup>3</sup> Similarly today, a homeless person suffering from a psychiatric illness or an addiction is not always viewed as someone who has a disorder or is taxed by overwhelming circumstances and in need of immediate help. Instead, the affliction becomes a metaphor for a host of evils, serving as testimony to an individual's unworthiness and becoming a cause for condemnation.

Most important, these incriminating views serve to blame the victim and have led in both periods to calls for reenacting vagrancy laws.<sup>4</sup> Rather than focusing on systemic changes or creating rational long-term policies, policymakers have marshaled well-worn crisis-oriented and sometimes destructive "solutions." To eliminate homelessness, Americans must acknowledge the causal role played by the economy, housing market, and unraveling communities, as well as by individual vulnerabilities, which determine who will be among the ranks of the homeless. Because we consistently shy away from systemic change and appropriate care for the most vulnerable, America's homeless population endures, relatively unchanged.

We compare the economic and social characteristics of the homeless population today with that of the turn of the century, and discuss similarities between the respective debates. We conclude by examining how ideologically driven views and moral prejudices have, in both eras, served to obscure the fundamental question of whether our society is willing to care for the neediest among us.

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## **Methodology**

We have chosen to focus on homelessness during the period from 1890 to 1925 because it encompasses the transition from an agrarian to an industrial society. Although the overall economy expanded during these years, the nation still experienced periods of economic depression, unemployment, and homelessness. Tramps were part of a highly mobile labor pool, which met the needs of a rapidly industrializing nation.<sup>5</sup> As one observer noted, homeless men were "the pioneers of modern industry. They go hither and thither to the rough, unfinished, uncomfortable places of the world to provide homes and civilized comforts for those of us who follow."<sup>6</sup> Since members of this group were usually unskilled and seasonally employed, they were often the first to lose their jobs during the many depressions that occurred between 1870 and 1940.

During the 1870s, Americans first identified "tramps" as a serious social problem. Michael Katz argued that tramps became a national obsession.<sup>7</sup> Discussion of the "tramp problem" was a regular feature in the popular as well as the professional press of the early Progressive period. Administrators, social commentators, and aca-



demics took up the subject of the homeless with great industry and zeal. Even Bram Stoker, author of the 1897 best-seller *Dracula*, made a contribution to this debate, suggesting in 1909 that tramps should be made to bear some sort of indelible "personal marking" to indicate their status.<sup>8</sup>

We draw in large part on written sources published in the United States between 1890 and 1925. As Haskell wrote, the last quarter of the nineteenth century witnessed the professionalization of social work and social science.<sup>9</sup> Clinicians and researchers in these fields became the experts on homelessness, producing an ample body of demographic and descriptive information on homeless people. They conducted studies of transients and wrote books, pamphlets, and dissertations on the subject.

Although a few social experts conducted systematic quantitative studies of homelessness, their varied methodologies make cross-survey comparisons difficult. Most data were gathered during interviews with residents of poorhouses or workhouses, or with those seeking public assistance. Frank Laubach's 1916 dissertation at Columbia University, "Why There Are Vagrants,"<sup>10</sup> is an example of this type of quantitative research. Laubach gathered information from one hundred men at a wood yard operated by the Charity Organization of New York. He also reported on two data sets collected by Superintendent Whiting in 1914 at the New York Municipal Lodging House: one described the demographic characteristics of 2,000 men while the other described 18,606 men.<sup>11</sup> Between 1900 and 1902, Alice Solenberger, a social worker, conducted a now classic study of the thousand homeless men who applied to the Chicago Bureau of Charities.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, between 1902 and 1903, Benjamin Marsh researched the life histories of 118 vagrants at the Wayfarer's Lodge in Philadelphia.<sup>13</sup> In addition, J. J. McCook asked the mayors of forty cities to complete information about their tramp populations. He asked thirty-two questions about each tramp and received a total of 1,349 autobiographies from fourteen cities.<sup>14</sup> We rely heavily on these studies, especially in our discussion of the origins of homelessness. Of course, the conclusions of these sources must always be scrutinized for methodological deficiencies and biases and evaluated within the context of the Progressive era.

Another set of articles focuses primarily on the origins of the homelessness problem and on potential solutions; these policy-oriented articles generally suggest measures to eradicate homelessness. Often punctuated with cries of moral outrage, they reflect the authors' values and ideological concerns. From 1870 onward, the new social science publications, such as the *Charities' Review* and *Forum*, as well as the popular press, speculated on the causes of the vagrancy problem.<sup>15</sup>

We have also used biographical and autobiographical accounts to supplement our study, recognizing that these narratives frequently present a romanticized view of the homeless. Throughout 1907, *Cosmopolitan* published Jack London's series "My Life in the Underworld," a lively account of his adventures as an eighteen-year-old tramp.<sup>16</sup> Nels Anderson's *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923) is another example of this genre; Anderson, a former hobo, became a founding member of the "Chicago School" of sociology.<sup>17</sup> Other narrative descriptions of the homeless population include participant observation studies in which researchers dressed as tramps and lived on the road or in lodging houses.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, in preparing this article, we reviewed various secondary sources, including the work of Katz,<sup>19</sup> Monkkonen,<sup>20</sup> Schneider,<sup>21</sup> and Ringenbach.<sup>22</sup>

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## Definitions

As the historian John Schneider observed, American authors writing during the late nineteenth century constructed numerous typologies of “homeless” men, largely differentiating among hoboes, tramps, and vagrants.<sup>23</sup> Although all were viewed as outsiders, “detached from the soil and the fireside,” there was a hierarchy, a “tramp caste” determined by a person’s relationship to work and to family.<sup>24</sup>

Hoboes were “merely men out of work,” forced to the road by economic difficulties.<sup>25</sup> They were typically young men who wandered in search of work and usually found seasonal or migratory jobs.<sup>26</sup> In an admittedly romantic account, Anderson described hoboes as “easy-going individual(s) who live from hand to mouth for the mere joy of living.”<sup>27</sup> A tramp also wandered, but he was defined by authorities as a person who was not looking for work. In 1896, the Massachusetts legislature defined a tramp as “any person, not being a minor under seventeen years of age, a blind person, or a person asking charity within his own city or town, who roves about from place to place begging, or living without labor or visible support.”<sup>28</sup> Aside from his lack of a home, he lived within the boundaries of the law. At the bottom of the hierarchy was the vagrant, who, in addition to being homeless, was often a social miscreant, engaging in petty thievery and other antisocial conduct.<sup>29</sup>

The language describing hoboes, tramps, and vagrants was at once value laden and reflective of a colorful and romantic view of the wanderer. Jack London used many terms to capture the complexities of tramp culture: the diminutive “Bo” for hobo, the fraternity of “Haut Beaux”; “musher” from the corruption of the French *marcher*, meaning “to walk”; “gay-cat” for rookie hobo; “comet” for old-timer; and “flopper” for a beggar who resorted to dramatic demonstrations of illness.<sup>30</sup> Commonly, a homeless person was given pet names such as “vag, bum, hobo or Weary Willie.”<sup>31</sup> The use of these names indicated the popularly held conception that a hobo’s life on the road was a matter of choice, even an enjoyable pastime.

Sometimes, the words *hobo*, *tramp*, and *vagrant* were used interchangeably to describe men who traveled from city to city, often hitching a free ride at the expense of the railroad companies. In large towns, they often found cheap lodgings and the companionship of peers. Tramp districts such as New York’s Bowery, Chicago’s Main Stem, and Philadelphia’s Skid Row emerged and began to grow. Similar to today, the numbers of tramps were large and growing, a flourishing shelter network sprang up in response, and commentators concluded that the problem was bigger and more desperate than ever before.

By 1916, the earlier distinctions among hoboes, tramps, and vagrants had blurred. “Vagrant” was consistently interchanged with other words such as “down-and-outs,” “bums,” “beggars,” “tramps,” “driftwoods,” “panhandlers,” and “homeless men.”<sup>32</sup> The homogenization of terms has partly persisted into contemporary times, with similar themes predominating: instead of looking for work, most “bums” are seen as looking for handouts. Any residual glamour associated with a freewheeling lifestyle has all but disappeared.

Today we refer to the entire population as “homeless,” a term that implies a broad continuum of economic and residential instability as well as disconnection from community and family ties. Contemporary homelessness, however, reflects more than disrupted ties to work and family. Current distinctions reflect the severity of the low-income housing crisis and the heterogeneity of the population. In contrast to

homeless people in the earlier era who generally had a roof over their heads, “street people” are the most visible subgroup of the homeless population and literally live on the streets, in abandoned buildings, in campgrounds, and in cars. They do not reside in almshouses and lodging houses as they did at the turn of the century<sup>33</sup> or in emergency shelters as many other homeless people do today. Finally, contemporary experts have again created subcategories of homeless persons based on demographic characteristics — adult individuals, families, and youth — which highlight the heterogeneity of the population.<sup>34</sup>

With these differences in mind, we examine some of the themes common to both eras: the recurrently high rates of homelessness, the context of extreme poverty and economic dislocation, and the enduring characteristics of the homeless population, including the prevalence of individual disabilities.

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### **Extent of the Problem, 1890–1925**

Counting the homeless is a formidable if not impossible task, and because of serious methodological problems, the numbers, then and now, are not well suited to comparisons. However, given this caveat, we can make various general statements. The number of homeless persons has always ebbed and flowed with fluctuations in the national economy.<sup>35</sup> Although the overall economy expanded during the period from 1890 to 1925, for example, the nation still experienced severe bouts of economic depression and unemployment, which were associated with proportionately larger numbers of homeless persons. During the crash of 1873, 38,000 men lost their homes.<sup>36</sup> As the economy recovered during the 1880s, the number of homeless persons declined, but by 1890 the homeless population increased to 45,000, then doubled to approximately 90,000 within three years. During this period nearly 16,000 businesses collapsed, unemployment hovered around 3 million, and the economy functioned at 25 to 30 percent below capacity.<sup>37</sup>

Conservative estimates of the numbers of tramps who rode the rails between 1890 and 1925 range from 100,000 to 500,000.<sup>38</sup> These numbers, while difficult to verify, are based on records kept by big-city shelters, the railroads, and charitable facilities such as poorhouses and jails. During its first eleven years (1901–1912), the New York City Municipal Lodging House sheltered about 542,000 men, 62,000 women, and 18,000 children.<sup>39</sup> The Wayfarer’s Lodge in Philadelphia housed 28,000 men annually from 1900 to 1907.<sup>40</sup> During the same period, Chicago institutions sheltered approximately 40,000 to 60,000 homeless each year.<sup>41</sup> The growth of lodging houses throughout the country also reflected the alarming increase in the numbers of vagrants. In 1890, poorhouses were available in only six large cities; twenty years later most cities had a sizable number.<sup>42</sup>

Today, estimates of the homeless population vary wildly according to the source: numbers range from 250,000 to as many as 3 million nationwide. The federally accepted number of homeless persons is estimated at 500,000–600,000; the figure was derived from a 1987 Urban Institute study of soup kitchens and shelters in large U.S. cities (100,000 or more).<sup>43</sup> While single men and women still comprise the majority of the population, increasing numbers of families have joined their ranks. In addition, between 61,500 and 100,000 homeless children sleep in emergency shelters, welfare hotels, abandoned buildings, or cars each night.<sup>44</sup>



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## Poverty and Unemployment

Homelessness is merely one phase in a cycle of extreme poverty. A decrease in income or increase in expenses places persons living below the poverty level at high risk of becoming homeless. Not surprisingly, surges in the poverty rate are mirrored by increasing numbers of homeless people.

In 1904, Robert Hunter asserted that no fewer than 10 million Americans, 12 percent of the population, were living in poverty. These people were unable "to obtain those necessities which will permit them to maintain a state of physical efficiency"; they were "underclothed, underfed, and miserably housed."<sup>45</sup> Among the extremely poor were unskilled workers who most often lived at or below the poverty line.

Hunter, using the few available cost-of-living studies, fixed the poverty line at \$460 per year for a family of five in the industrial states of the Northeast and Midwest, and at \$300 per year in the rural South.<sup>46</sup> On the basis of scattered statistics, Hunter asserted that the 350,000 railroad trackmen and carmen earned less than \$375 per year in the North, and less than \$150 in the South. Cotton mill workers averaged \$360 in the North and \$235 in the South. Sixty percent of the coal miners earned less than \$450. In the mid-Atlantic states, nearly 30 percent of the work force earned less than \$300.<sup>47</sup>

At times, even such low-paying jobs as these were scarce. For example, Frederick Turner, a contemporary expert on the frontier, argued that the depression of the 1890s "did violence to the comfortable assumption that ample employment awaited the worthy and the willing."<sup>48</sup> And "when the poor face the necessity of becoming paupers," he continued, "when they must apply for charity if they are to live at all, many desert their families and enter the ranks of vagrancy."<sup>49</sup> As Keyssar noted, "By the end of the Progressive Era, unemployment had become a major item on the nation's list of social problems."<sup>50</sup>

Because of methodological problems, we are unable to compare the job patterns and income levels of homeless persons during the two study periods. Although homeless persons at the turn of the century were more often employed and had greater housing options than their contemporary counterparts, these differences simply represent a matter of degree. For example, following a period of abnormal unemployment during the winter of 1914–1915, the Advisory Social Service Committee of New York's Municipal Lodging House found that 90 percent of the men they studied had been without work for over one week and nearly two-thirds for over a month. Fewer than 15 percent however, had been unemployed for over six months<sup>51</sup> and nearly two-thirds claimed to have been stably employed for an average of 12.2 months during the preceding five years.<sup>52</sup>

Homeless persons today seem to have more erratic work patterns and are more destitute despite the fact that many are receiving benefits.<sup>53</sup> In Rossi's study of today's homeless in Chicago, "only 3% reported having a steady job and only 39% worked for some period during the previous month." Rossi compared this group to homeless persons during the previous two decades and concluded that "the new homeless suffer a much more profound degree of economic destitution."<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, compared to the earlier period, many more women and children are on the streets today than ever before. Because homelessness is a manifestation of extreme poverty and because families headed by women are disproportionately poor, these families are especially vulnerable to economic vicissitudes. Approxi-

mately one third of families headed by women are living below the poverty level. Although the numbers of poor people decreased slightly between 1983 and 1989, the poverty rate climbed in 1990, and 2.1 million Americans became poor. Meanwhile, the poverty rate among children and female-run households remained consistently high throughout the 1980s. Currently, children younger than eighteen make up 38 percent of the nation's 33.6 million poor, a fact mirrored by the growing numbers of children and youth among the contemporary homeless population.<sup>55</sup>

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## Housing

During 1890–1929, housing production in cities throughout the United States generally lagged behind housing needs. Housing starts between 1890 and 1904, 1919 and 1930, and in 1930 fell far short of the 1899 figure of 342,000 starts, while the number of persons per household remained fairly high (1890, 5.0; 1900, 4.8; 1910, 4.5; 1920, 4.3; 1930, 4.1; the 1970 figure was 3.1 persons per dwelling unit). The housing boom that began in 1905 and lasted until World War I began to meet housing demand, but the war caused a severe setback in housing construction, which was restored by the mid-1920s. However, the Great Depression and World War II again created housing shortages.<sup>56</sup>

Two important trends shed some light on the origins of the housing shortage during this period. The first was the population boom. Between 1890 and 1930, the U.S. population almost doubled as 60 million people were added to the nation's total. Immigration accounted for 37 percent of the increase. Because these "new wave" immigrants settled in port cities where they landed or gravitated to factory and mining towns, housing shortages were particularly acute — and housing conditions particularly crowded and squalid — in these areas.<sup>57</sup> Still, as the National Housing Association conferences made clear at the turn of the century, housing shortages and rank housing conditions during this period were not confined to urban areas.

A second trend was urban migration. In 1890, 35 percent of the population lived in urban areas. By 1900 the number increased to 39 percent, by 1910 to 46 percent, by 1920 to 52 percent, and by 1930 the number climbed to 56 percent of the population.<sup>58</sup> Many groups of people were moving to urban environs: native-born Americans moved from farms to cities; native-born blacks moved from the rural South to the urban industrialized North; and immigrants flooded into urban areas.<sup>59</sup>

In *Recent Trends in American Housing* (1931), Edith Wood summarized the housing situation during the period from 1905 to 1929 as follows.

The housing shortage at the end of the War came as a surprise to most people in the United States. . . . In 1917 and 1918 almost no building was done except by the Federal government. Private building was expected to resume briskly as soon as the War was over. It started to do so, but halted. The cost of a home — labor and materials — had doubled.

The volume of home-building in 1919, instead of reducing the shortage, was only 58% of normal. That of 1920 reached only 37% of normal. . . . The maximum shortage was at the end of 1921, when it reached at least one and a quarter million. Then the tide turned. Nineteen twenty-two held its own. Each year thereafter showed substantial gains. By 1926 the end of the shortage was in sight. By 1928 it had been reached. In a nationwide numerical sense, there was no longer a



housing shortage. We were back to where we were before the War, with qualitative rather than quantitative needs. So far as net progress was concerned, ten years had been lost.<sup>60</sup>

Wood reported that during the period of housing shortages, housing standards plummeted and rents soared. Housing structures fell into disrepair, single-family units were turned into apartments, existing apartments were divided into even smaller rental units, unsound vacant housing was occupied, and doubling up of families was common.<sup>61</sup> Jacob Riis eloquently exposed the wretched conditions in New York City's tenements in his classic study, *How The Other Half Lives*.<sup>62</sup> Overcrowding was rampant in all housing arrangements.

The density of New York's Lower East Side — 1,000 people per acre — exceeded that of any European or even Asian city; its closest rival was one district in Bombay. During the post-Civil War era, cities on the eastern seaboard were congested with tides of foreign immigrants heaped on top of a native population streaming in from the countryside; by 1900 New York's population had tripled and Boston's more than doubled. The housing have-nots packed themselves tightly into cellars and tenements of appalling squalor, deprived of adequate light, air, heat, and running water. Two or three families typically shared a dwelling unit (often a single room) and scores of families shared an outside toilet.<sup>63</sup>

Thus the housing rebound during the late 1920s was a quantitative one; the country still remained strapped with a severe qualitative housing problem.<sup>64</sup> However, in contrast to today, persons did not literally reside on the streets.

The severity of the contemporary low-income housing crisis has left many poor persons precariously housed and at high risk of homelessness. Cutbacks in benefits coupled with severe shortages in affordable housing have jeopardized the stability of all people with reduced or fixed incomes. As the median rents of low-income apartments climbed, the number of poor renters markedly increased. The supply of affordable housing was further depleted by gentrification and condominium conversion, a shortage never addressed by the federal government. In the past ten years, the government virtually ceased funding construction or rehabilitation programs for low- and moderate-income housing. Furthermore, in the past decade, new commitments for the construction of public and Section 8, or subsidized, housing fell dramatically from approximately 173,000 to 12,000 apartments.<sup>65</sup> The crisis in affordability and availability of low-income housing has catapulted many people onto the streets. As Rossi concluded, "Homelessness today is a more severe condition of housing deprivation than in decades past."<sup>66</sup>

The preceding contextual comparisons reveal that the homeless populations during both study periods suffered from poverty, unemployment, and housing shortages. The contemporary homeless population, however, seems to face a bleaker economic situation, with higher levels of unemployment and poverty than its turn-of-the-century counterpart; the recent increase in the number of female-headed families has exacerbated the problem. Whereas in the earlier period there was a cyclical housing shortage and a consistent qualitative housing problem — living conditions were often wretched, and doubling up and substandard living were common — today's acute housing shortage has forced more people to live literally on the streets. With these macro-level contexts in mind, we turn to the characteristics of the homeless population, past and present.

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## Characteristics of the Homeless Population

### *Demographics*

Despite allegations that the current homeless population tends to be younger than in previous periods, vagrants at the turn of the century were also young and, as today, the percentage of elderly on the streets was small.

Data from sources during the period 1890–1925 suggest that the majority of homeless persons at that time was between twenty and forty years, with an estimated average age of thirty-four years.<sup>67</sup> In Philadelphia and Chicago, for example, 40 percent were less than thirty years. Among the 19,000 men at the New York City Municipal Lodging House in 1909, 43 percent were under thirty, and in Baltimore 30 percent were between twenty and twenty-five years.<sup>68</sup> The percentage of persons over fifty years old was correspondingly small — in most studies not exceeding 15 percent.<sup>69</sup>

Similar to today, the systematic studies of the homeless published nearly a century ago revealed that an estimated 74 to 80 percent of vagrants were single; only 8 to 12 percent were married.<sup>70</sup> Fourteen percent had lost their spouses, and 26 percent had deserted their wives and families.<sup>71</sup> Approximately 58 percent had no contact with their families, and only 33 percent had homes to which they could return if they wished.<sup>72</sup>

The data concerning homeless women are scarce, but a number of studies suggest that female vagrancy was a significant problem. During the eighteenth century, the number of female vagrants was extremely large, often equaling one half of the homeless population. One hundred years later, the Municipal Lodging House in New York City housed one woman for every 8.7 men, a ratio indicating that the problem was still considerable.<sup>73</sup> Although male vagrants outnumbered females during this time, female vagrancy was less tolerated by public opinion, as well as by the authorities. In terms of contemporary figures, Rossi's Chicago study (1985–1986) reported that approximately 25 percent of the homeless population in Chicago was female;<sup>74</sup> this percentage has been corroborated by other contemporary researchers.<sup>75</sup>

A notable difference between the populations of the two periods, however, is the virtual lack of homeless families during the earlier era. Though homeless families were rarely mentioned in the literature of the early 1900s, it is clear that those families who were homeless faced particularly severe struggles. Solenberger thought that

a most interesting chapter might be written about the tramp-women and the tramp-families on the road, figures as familiar to charity workers as men tramps, and whose restoration to normal living presents even more serious and difficult problems.<sup>76</sup>

Homeless families were viewed as more difficult to rehabilitate and more costly to the state. Edward Devine declared that homeless families should be more “dreaded than the single vagrant, for charity will respond to appeals on behalf of a dependent family even to the extent of providing a living for months together if the head of the family is not employed.”<sup>77</sup> Today, homeless families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population and comprise approximately one-third overall. Consisting predominantly of families headed by women, they tend to have two to three children, most of whom are preschoolers aged three to five years old.<sup>78</sup>

Although vagrancy was commonly believed to be endemic among immigrants, three of the quantitative studies of the homeless — Marsh, Laubach, and Solen-

berger — revealed that more than two thirds of all vagrants were American-born, with the remainder of European origin.<sup>79</sup> (In New York City a higher percentage of the homeless were foreigners, probably due to the city's role as a major port of entry.)<sup>80</sup> In contrast, homeless families today generally have grown up in or near the community where they are being sheltered. Although some are geographically mobile and foreign-born, the majority are indigenous.

In statements prefiguring similar commentary today, numerous writers during the late 1800s asserted that homelessness was due to unstable family life. According to Laubach, "the ultimate causes of vagrancy . . . (were) often to be found in the lack of good mothers" and solid, supportive families.<sup>81</sup> Laubach and Marsh both reported that a large number of vagrants had grown up in unstable family situations, making them more likely to have fragmented family ties as adults.<sup>82</sup>

Many were orphaned or came from abusive families and later turned their backs on family life. While 48 to 59 percent had lost one or both parents at a young age, 25 percent had run away to escape abuse and violence. Forty-five percent reported that their fathers drank excessively, and 17 percent said that their mothers had abused alcohol.<sup>83</sup> Of course, pinpointing what constituted "alcohol abuse" and "alcoholism" in those years — during which there was an energetic and influential temperance movement — is extremely difficult.

The childhood experiences of today's homeless men resonate with those of their forefathers. In their 1985 study of hundreds of "first-timer" and veteran shelter residents, Susser et al.<sup>84</sup> found "a high frequency of a history of institutional separation from the family during childhood. Similarly, a childhood history of delinquency or running away was common." Fifteen percent of the first-timers and 12 percent of the veterans reported histories of psychiatric hospitalization. Before age seventeen, 13 percent of the first-timers and 17 percent of the veterans had been placed in foster care, group homes, or special residences. Susser et al. also found that "running away for an extended period, school expulsion, going to jail or reform school, or more than one of these childhood events was reported by 43% of the first-timers and 34% of the [veteran] sample."<sup>85</sup>

### *Individual Disadvantage and Disabilities*

Essayists and researchers at the turn of the century divided the individual characteristics that could interfere with a person's ability to work into four categories: "moral, temperamental, mental and physical."<sup>86</sup> Moral and temperamental categories overlapped and reflected harsh value judgments about the antisocial nature of particular habits and behaviors. Temperamental factors included pernicious character traits, such as wanderlust, laziness, disdain of work, hasty tempers, and hypocrisy, while moral factors included "vices" such as drunkenness, drug abuse, sensuality, gambling, and crimes.<sup>87</sup> Mental and physical disqualifications referred to various illnesses and chronically disabling conditions.

Experts during both eras agreed that a disproportionate percentage of homeless persons suffer from such disabilities as mental illness and addictions, and that these difficulties often interfere with their capacity to work and to remain self-sufficient. However, similar to today's commentators, many writers recognized that the causal link between individual vulnerabilities and vagrancy was tenuous, since individual factors might actually result from homelessness and were always secondary to macro-level factors like the economic recession. During both eras, the relative con-



tributions of these factors to the risk of homelessness was hotly debated. The following discussion focuses primarily on the turn of the century; the current debate echoes many of the issues raised.

### ***Temperamental Factors***

Temperamental traits were defined as “eccentricities [that] . . . disqualified men for cooperative effort and rendered them unprofitable as employees.”<sup>88</sup> Wanderlust was the most commonly cited peculiarity that made it difficult for the vagrant to work. Thirty-one percent of the men at the Wayfarer’s Lodge in Philadelphia were said to suffer from it.<sup>89</sup> While popular writers like Jack London romanticized the life of the wanderer, others suggested that wanderlust was commonly linked to domestic difficulties. Laubach, for example, reported that many vagrants, allegedly seized by wanderlust (a predominantly male malady), had abandoned conflicted marital and family situations.<sup>90</sup>

Because the number of vagrants appeared to have increased after the Civil War, a number of commentators posited that many veterans had been unable to settle back into civilian life after roaming with the army. Some authors thought that these vagrants had merely developed an appetite for the rough, wandering life of the brigade. However, it remains unclear how often war-related physical or psychological disabilities, similar to those experienced by Vietnam veterans today, alienated these men from the social mainstream.

Similar to writers at the turn of the century, some contemporary analysts have also romanticized life on the streets. Although not invoking temperamental factors, commentators such as President Ronald Reagan have stated that homeless people are homeless by choice. Rather than emphasizing that structural factors in our society ensure homelessness, and that life on the streets is fraught with extreme dangers and stresses as well as constant assaults on one’s dignity and self-respect, they have erroneously concluded that personal choice is often the critical issue in its origins.

### ***Moral Factors***

Many commentators viewed drunkenness as, in the words of Laubach, “the greatest immediate factor in the making of vagrants.”<sup>91</sup> Because alcoholism was regarded as within the conscious control of the abuser, it was considered a moral problem. Depending on the sample and the criteria used, estimates of the percentage of vagrants addicted to alcohol ranged from approximately 20 percent to 80 percent.<sup>92</sup> But statistics about alcoholics must be evaluated carefully, since definitions of “alcoholism” varied greatly.

Physicians who examined 2,000 men at the New York Municipal Lodging House in 1914 diagnosed approximately 39 percent as having alcoholism. Their director, Dr. James Alexander Miller, suspected that these “figures probably do not represent by any means the number of individuals who were alcoholic but are rather indicative only of the number who manifested acute evidence of that condition at the time of the investigation.”<sup>93</sup> Superintendent Whiting of the Municipal Lodging House estimated that “30% had entered the life of vagrancy through the saloon.”<sup>94</sup> Sixty-six percent of the men who came to the Chicago Free Municipal Lodging House lived on the streets because of their alcohol abuse.<sup>95</sup> While Laubach described 80 percent of the men in his study as “slaves to rum to such an extent that they crave it as food,” Solenberger, citing the smallest percentage, found only 195 alcoholics among the 1,000 homeless men she studied.<sup>96</sup> Solenberger, however, differentiated between the

behaviors associated with drinking and the medical effects. She concluded that only sixteen of these men had alcohol problems serious enough to interfere with work.

Most authors recognized that the causal relationship between alcoholism and homelessness was unclear. The more time vagrants spent on the streets, the more they turned to alcohol. "Frequently the illnesses are attributable to drink or immorality," wrote Laubach, "but more often perhaps, they are attributable to exposure, irregularity of eating and wretched food."<sup>97</sup>

The decriminalization of the public inebriate in 1965 has helped to transform alcoholism from a moral to a medical problem. Although images of the skid row alcoholic are still colored by moral invectives not dissimilar to those expressed at the turn of the century, a large contemporary literature has documented the nature and extent of the substance-abuse problem among homeless persons, and its relationship to the antecedents, causes, and consequences of homelessness.<sup>98</sup> Some of the issues debated in the earlier era are still evident today.

### ***Mental Factors***

Social workers at the turn of the century made little distinction between neurologic and psychiatric disorders, or between mental illness and retardation. Thus, this category includes neurologic illnesses (syphilis), epilepsy, retardation ("feeble-mindedness") and chronic mental illness (insanity). Laubach, Solenberger, and Whiting found that approximately 10 to 25 percent suffered from some sort of mental illness.<sup>99</sup> Solenberger noted that her figure of 10 percent would be greatly increased "if there were added the border-line cases" of mental imbalance such as wanderlust, crime, and vice. According to Solenberger, 64 percent of those with mental disorders were actually insane, and about one third of those were also alcoholics.<sup>100</sup> Solenberger reported that at least half the men she studied had been "inmates of institutions," primarily insane asylums, poorhouses, homes for the incurable, and jails.<sup>101</sup>

Solenberger attributed the presence of mentally ill individuals among the homeless to lack of social connections and to institutional inadequacy. Twenty-five percent of the homeless men she studied had neither relatives nor friends. In addition, the system of public institutions failed to contain chronically dysfunctional individuals within a supportive or custodial network. For example, after the age of sixteen, a feeble-minded person was no longer eligible for hospital admission.<sup>102</sup>

Solenberger researched the question of whether men become "homeless and vagrant because of their insanity, or insane because of their vagrancy."<sup>103</sup> After documenting the presence of mental disorders well before the individual became a transient, Solenberger concluded that "insanity acts as a cause of vagrancy more often than vagrancy as a cause of insanity."<sup>104</sup> Once on the streets, Solenberger found, the insane homeless were more likely to suffer from serious starvation and exposure than other vagrants. Often their delusions prevented them from accepting care and shelter.<sup>105</sup>

Today, a spate of studies has documented the extent and nature of mental illness among homeless adult individuals. Researchers generally agree that approximately one third of this subgroup suffers from schizophrenia and other psychotic disorders. The failure of deinstitutionalization, the relative lack of comprehensive community alternatives, and the razing of the SROs in many large cities during the 1980s renders these disabled individuals particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless.<sup>106</sup>

Although many experts have focused on the recent abandonment of the chronically mentally ill to the streets, adequate resources have never been allocated, whether in the hospital or in the community care of the chronically mentally ill. Because of the relative lack of institutional and family supports, mentally ill people have frequently been forced to turn to emergency shelters for refuge.<sup>107</sup>

### *Physical Factors*

Many vagrants at the turn of the century suffered from some form of physical disability. Laubach found that as many as 77 percent of the men he studied were physically impaired, but predicted that if they received appropriate medical treatment 43 percent would improve significantly.<sup>108</sup> Solenberger reported that 627 men (63%) in her study were in poor health and listed the following distribution of disorders: crippling handicap (27%), tuberculosis (15%), mental disorders (14%), blindness (7%), rheumatism (6%), paralysis (6%), aging (5.6%), and convalescence (5.3%).<sup>109</sup> Figures from New York's Municipal Lodging House generally confirm Solenberger's findings.

Many men who were maimed in industrial and railroad accidents joined the vagrant population. Without antibiotics, and sometimes without medical treatment at all, a minor injury might become crippling or even fatal. Ernest Poole, writing in *Everybody's Magazine*, claimed that

in the past 10 years, the railroads, the mines, the factories, mills and docks have maimed over a million men. And the public is paying the pensions. For thousands of cripples, thrown out of their regular work, take to the road; and with no miracle coming to turn them back, become out-and-out tramps and bums, doing no work at all, begging and stealing their way.<sup>110</sup>

A small percentage of homeless tramps suffered from physical disorders resulting from old age. Generally, the aged homeless consisted of men who had been industrious most of their lives, but who were too infirm to pursue their work. According to Solenberger, they had to choose between the "Old Folks' Home and the freedom of vagrancy."<sup>111</sup>

A 1988 report by the Institute of Medicine on the health needs of homeless persons today indicates that the rates of both acute and chronic medical illnesses are higher among the homeless than among comparable groups in the general population.<sup>112</sup> The authors conclude that chronic medical disabilities may be associated with a higher risk of becoming homeless, and that once people are homeless, life on the streets causes them a range of medical problems, exacerbates others, and invariably makes treatment difficult. Infections and diseases worsened by overcrowding are common; for example, tuberculosis has become epidemic in some shelters and their neighboring communities. During both eras, the nature of the problems and illnesses common among homeless people also partly reflects problems in the service delivery system. For example, the elderly today have become far less vulnerable to homelessness because of increased benefit and assistance programs, such as Social Security and congregate housing.

Homeless persons mirror the extremely poor; as the profile of poor persons changes, so does that of the homeless population. For the most part, the populations during both periods had more likenesses than differences: they tended to be young,



single, and American-born, had fragmented social supports, and often grew up in dysfunctional families. Chronically disabled individuals, particularly those without adequate institutional protection, comprised a large percentage of the homeless during both periods. Although today's experts have documented a dramatic increase in the numbers of women among the homeless — 3 percent in the fifties and sixties to 25 percent today — the number of women in previous eras was also high. At the turn of the century approximately 10 percent of the tramp population was female. A notable difference between the populations is the virtual lack of homeless families in the earlier era. Today, families are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, comprising nearly one third of the overall number.

During the early nineteenth century, vagrancy was sometimes attributed to individual habits and character traits rather than to economic dislocation and extreme poverty. Although physical disability was regarded as a “legitimate” reason not to work, the gray area between men who were able to work and those who could not provoked heated moral commentary. Solenberger, for example, believed that a man's ability to work depended on his character, temperament, and moral fiber rather than on the nature of the disability.<sup>113</sup> She compared men who overcame catastrophic physical disabilities to others who sank into lives of “moral degeneracy and vagrancy,” burdened by only minor physical problems. Similar to experts in both eras, she did not understand that systemic ills plaguing our society virtually ensure homelessness and that individual difficulties play an important role in determining who is most vulnerable in this context.

The homeless of both periods were primarily victims of economic dislocation; their numbers fluctuated with the health of the economy. At the turn of the century, the rapidly growing tramp problem was primarily related to unemployment and underemployment. Today, homeless persons are also subject to the vagaries of the economy, but as Rossi has described, housing deprivation is more acute today than it has been in decades past.<sup>114</sup>

Polarizing the debate about the origins of homelessness and not acknowledging the primacy of economic factors impugned its victims and cleared a path for the introduction of punitive measures against persons who were different from the so-called mainstream either on the basis of extreme poverty or disability. Some of the prejudices are still apparent in our contemporary management of homelessness, especially with respect to the homeless who are mentally disabled, alcoholic, or physically ill (for example, HIV victims).

The punitive “solutions” of the past, such as workhouses and labor colonies, and of the present, such as the revived effort to enforce vagrancy laws, partly stem from this oppositional understanding of the antecedents of homelessness. The emergence of bias in turn-of-the-century analyses also grew out of tendencies to treat homelessness as a monolithic entity, overlooking the coupling of systemic and individualistic determinants. Equally dangerous, various writers at the turn of the century — like some contemporary analysts — have romanticized life on the streets, erroneously concluding that personal choice is the critical issue in the origins of homelessness.

Whether on the basis of extreme poverty, chronic disability, or both, persons without homes have always been misunderstood or stigmatized by the population at large. Indeed, there were romantic heroes who traveled the rails looking for adventure and supporting themselves with seasonal labor, and there are people today who

have been evicted or are escaping dysfunctional families or abusive husbands. But there have always been persons seriously disabled by alcoholism, mental disorders, and physical handicaps, problems that contributed significantly to their susceptibility to economic displacement. The turn-of-the-century debate highlights the speciousness of aspects of our contemporary debate and should encourage us to tackle the real question of how to address the profound dislocation plaguing the most vulnerable among us. 🐼

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## Notes

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